

Sermon for Sunday 3 July 2022 – Peter and Paul, Apostles

Zechariah 4.1-6, 10b-end; 2 Timothy 4.6-8, 17, 18; Matthew 16.13-19

Very Revd Dr Christopher Lewis

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Thank you very much for the welcome, and thank you Graham for making the arrangements. You are fortunate to have such a wonderful church in a very special town. I've got to know it over the years through having an uncle and aunt who lived here, and indeed a cousin and his wife living here now. Last time I preached here was my Uncle Clive's funeral, which was both sad and not a sad occasion, but it marked the conclusion of a long and fruitful Christian life. And now your paternal festival, added to by the Friends Organisation, who attached their annual meeting to this service, so I look forward to that.

But I must concentrate on patron saints. Preachers often stray from the path, and having worked in cathedrals, I need always to remember a neat notice which was attached to a hot air hand dryer, and the notice said, 'Press here for a message from the Dean.' As well as the Church and its people, you are fortunate in having two patron saints about whom much is known and from whom we can learn. Because Christianity has a long and broad history, there is a great variety of saints, and when I was at St Albans Cathedral, we occasionally broadcast the view that Alban, as the first Christian martyr, really should be the patron saint of England. It was, of course, a tongue-in-cheek effort, but we said that George was an important person, but was actually an import from the Crusades, cruel to dragons, and also that he quite possibly didn't exist. No success there, of course. You, however, have the two first leaders of the Church, who, after Jesus, were the founders. They had the virtue of being wonderfully different from each other.

Peter, with his somewhat impulsive nature, very much the leader of the Apostles and, as we heard in today's Gospel reading, definitely seen by Jesus as the rock on which the Church was founded. Why? Because in following Jesus faithfully, he recognised him as Christ, the Son of God. It's not unfair to remember the next passage in the Gospel about Peter, the very same Gospel, where Jesus speaks of his own suffering and death. And he is rebuked by the outspoken Peter, who is been told forcefully by Jesus that Jesus' own suffering, death and resurrection are his divine destiny and for the benefit of all the world.

In a way, and in spite of St Peter's Rome, that great building, Peter was not churchy material. He was the inspiration and leader of the Apostles. Perhaps all those stories of Peter at the gates of heaven are not so much because he was preventing people from coming in, like the Home Office does with immigrants, but maybe he is at the gates because he wants to let fellow sinners in. Peter at the gates; a friend of mine had a dream - a serious dream - he was a visitor to Heaven, being shown around by Peter. Nowadays, you would call it a visitor experience. And that was heaven, all beautiful and clean, harps and all, but absolutely no people there at all. So the obvious question - where are they all? 'Oh, that's simple,' said Peter, 'the ones who come here all want to help the people in the other place.'

Well, that dream fits well with the two letters of Peter in the New Testament, which encourage those who have become Christians and are new to the faith. They are now part of God's people, but also experiencing opposition. And he writes to them, they've come from darkness to light through Jesus Christ, and their faith is shown in the works which they do. This is the Peter who not only was the first to recognise Jesus as the Son of God, was leader of the Apostles, was at the Last Supper and at the Crucifixion, but also is said to have gone on to be leader of the Church in Jerusalem, and indeed to have been martyred for his faith.

The letters of Peter seem mainly to be for individuals to read, but when you come to St Paul, it was all very different, much more as from the kind of learned professor who'd been trained as a Pharisee, which he was, and felt responsibility for the many churches which had grown up and to which he travelled to visit. He speaks to whole churches made up of converts in all kinds of places, rejoicing in them, encouraging them, sometimes extremely angry with them, especially when people fell out with each other for foolish reasons.

It's fascinating to speculate how he would have thought of and treated the churches of today with their differences. Paul's greatest insight by far was to see that Jesus came for all, absolutely everybody, for the whole world, for everyone. That insight was to cause disagreement about the place of Jewish law, but the overall message was right and true, that Jesus lived and was killed and was raised to life for the benefit of all. Jesus was a Jew, lived within a Jewish context and in a way which demanded respect for the Jewish scriptures and for the Jewish people. A respect, of course, which has by no means always been shown.

At times the Church today finds itself worried or in danger of being neglected. Yet we have the saints to walk with or run with, and that makes not for a more peaceful life, but for a much more challenging and interesting life. Peter and Paul lived by faith in Jesus, and their faith grew through good times and through bad; in that case, not destroyed by their denials, by shipwrecks, by threats, by suffering. So it is right and true that these two very different characters should be living in the same patronal festival. What united them was much more important than what divided them. And, in fact, they complemented each other.

As we emerge out of COVID; or perhaps we don't, but as it goes on. but in a different form, praying for those who have suffered and died, we can reflect on the great truths for which Paul and Peter lived and died. On their work, the church all over the world was founded, and they preached and lived in a way which showed their closeness to Jesus' life and teaching, and to his new risen life with his Father and the Holy Spirit; Jesus' ministry, both of drawing people to God and opposing suffering of every kind. Today that may mean foodbanks and care homes, and love both for neighbours at home, and also for Afghans and for Ukrainians. Sometimes people say that you should not mix religion and politics; or maybe when they say that, they mean party politics. But if it means ethics and action and loving care for the world, then there's absolutely no doubt that the direction in which Peter and Paul point us was right. We need to be firm in our beliefs and in our actions to look after those who suffer.

It's fascinating that Peter, the non-intellectual, urges us to be able to talk about the hope which is central to our faith. Quoting from a letter of his in the Bible, 'always be ready to make your defence to anyone

who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you. Yet do it with gentleness and reverence.' That's from the first letter of Peter. Then a quote from St Paul, with which I'll finish. Fascinating that Paul, the intellectual rabbi, focuses on the nature of Christian love in absolutely practical terms. 'Let love be genuine, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good, love one another with mutual affection. Do not lag in zeal the ardent in spirit, serve the Lord, rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in in prayer; contribute to the needs of the saints, extend hospitality to strangers.' That's from Paul's letter to the Romans. Amen.